

Message Text

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SUBJ: FEDERAL REACTION TO STATE ELECTION RESULTS IN
VICTORIA

REF: MELBOURNE 0486

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: VICTORIAN ELECTION RESULTS REPORTED
REFTEL HAVE GLADDENED THE HEARTS OF LIBERAL PARTY
STALWARTS IN CANBERRA AND AROUND THE COUNTRY. INITIAL
REACTION THAT THESE RESULTS WOULD CAUSE THE
GOVERNMENT TO WITHDRAW FROM IDEA OF EARLY DOUBLE DISSOLUTION
OF FEDERAL PARLIAMENT HAS NOW BEEN TEMPERED BY
PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING
GOVERNMENT' S LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM AND CURRENT DISARRAY
OF OPPOSITION PARTIES. CURRENT INDICATIONS ARE THAT PRIME
MINISTER INTENDS PURSUE FEDERAL ELECTORAL BILL (WHICH
WAS RECENTLY REJECTED BY THE SENATE) TO ASCERTAIN
WHETHER FEDERAL OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL PASS GOVERNMENT
LEGISLATION OR BE PREPARED TO FACE DOUBLE DISSOLUTION
IN OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER THIS YEAR. LIBERAL PARTY SEEMS
TO BE LESS PREPARED FOR NEW ELECTIONS THAN IS ALP DESPITE PUBLIC
COMMENTS TO THE CONTRARY BY LIBERAL LEADER SNEDDEN. LIBERAL
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PARTY VICTORY IN VICTORIA SEEN BY OBJECTIVE OBSERVERS
AS PERSONAL VICTORY FOR HAMER AND AS VINDICATION OF
PROGRDSIVE LIBERALISM PRACTICED BY HIS GOVERNMENT.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HAMER' S LIBERALISM AND THAT

PRACTICED AT FEDERAL LEVEL IS NOT PARTICULARLY EVIDENT.
END SUMMARY.

2. SURPRISINGLY FEW CONCLUSIONS HAVE BEEN DRAWN AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL AS A RESULT OF THE UNEXPECTEDLY LARGE VICTORY OF THE LIBERAL PARTY GOVERNMENT IN THE VICTORIAN ELECTIONS LAST WEEKEND (REFTEL . THIS IS PARTLY DUE TO THE SUSPICION THAT RESULTS OF STATE ELECTIONS ARE NOT DIRECTLY APPLICABLE TO FEDERAL ELECTIONS AND THAT STATE CONTESTS ARE OFTEN WON ON LOCAL ISSUES AND THE BEHAVIOR OF LOCAL PERSONALITIES MORE THAN BY A CONCENTRATION UPON FEDERAL PROGRAMS AND LEADERSHIP. THERE IS NO DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT THE VICTORIAN ELECTION RESULTS HAVE BOLSTERED LIBERAL PARTY MORALE NATIONALLY AND THAT THE LOSS OF SEVERAL PERCENTAGE POINTS IN THE PORTION OF THE VOTE GOING TO THE COUNTRY PARTY AND DLP HAVE TENDED TO SUSTAIN THE PREVIOUS TALK OF A POSSIBLE MERGER OF THESE TWO PARTIES. THE ALP SHOWING IN VICTORIA REPRESENTED A LOSS OF ABOUT 6 PERCENT FROM THE VOTE IN THE FEDERAL ELECTION OF DECEMBER 1972 ALTHOUGH ITS PERCENTAGE OF THE VOTE IN STATE ELECTIONS REMAINED ABOUT THE SAME.

3. IN HIS PRESS CONFERENCE MAY 22, PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM MADE TWO COMMENTS UPON THE VICTORIAN RESULTS:
A) THE LOSS OF VOTES BY THE COUNTRY PARTY AND DLP JUSTIFIED HIS MUCH CRITICIZED EARLIER STATEMENT THAT THE VOTERS SHOULD USE THE VICTORIAN ELECTION AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSING THEIR DISAPPROVAL OF THE OBSTRUCTIONIST TACTICS TOWARD GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION TAKEN UP BY REPRESENTATIVES OF THESE TWO PARTIES IN THE FEDERAL SENATE. (OPPOSITION PARTIES CLAIMED THE POOR ALP SHOWING IN VICTORIA HAD REBUFFED WHITLAM FOR HIS ATTEMPT TO INFLUENCE THE ROLE OF THESE PARTIES IN THE SENATE THROUGH A STATE ELECTION) AND B) THE POOR SHOWING OF THE ALP IN VICTORIA IN TERMS OF SEATS WON WAS DUE TO THE " GERRYMANDERING" OF THE ELECTORAL DISTRICTS.
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4. WHEN WHITLAM WAS ASKED LATER IN THE PRESS CONFERENCE ABOUT THE EFFECT OF THE VICTORIAN RESULTS UPON THE POSSIBILITY OF A FEDERAL DOUBLE DISSOLUTION, HE RESPONDED BY GIVING ESSENTIALLY A TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT DOUBLE DISSOLUTION ENTAILED. HE DID INDICATE, HOWEVER, THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S ELECTORAL BILL WHICH HAD RECENTLY BEEN REJECTED BY THE AUSTRALIAN SENATE WOULD BE RE- INTRODUCED IN THE BUDGET SESSION OF PARLIAMENT BEGINNING THE THIRD WEEK OF AUGUST.

5. THE PROSPECTS OF A DOUBLE DISSOLUTION WERE CONSIDERED TO HAVE BEEN DECREASED IN THE INITIAL PRESS

REACTION TO THE VICTORIAN ELECTION RESULTS. WHITLAM'S STATEMENT ON RE-INTRODUCTION OF THE ELECTORAL BILL, HOWEVER, INDICATED THAT SHOULD THE ELECTORAL BILL BE AGAIN REJECTED BY THE SENATE THE GROUNDS FOR A DOUBLE DISSOLUTION WOULD EXIST IN OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER THIS YEAR. WHITLAM DID NOT SAY WHETHER OR NOT HE WOULD EXPECT TO MAKE USE OF THESE GROUNDS TO CALL FOR FULL ELECTIONS OF BOTH THE HOUSE AND THE SENATE AT THAT TIME.

6. PARLIAMENTARY INTEREST IN THE ELECTORAL BILL WAS HEIGHTENED DURING THE WEEK ALSO BY THE STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FRED DALY THAT A REDISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA WOULD GO FORWARD UNDER STATE LAW IN ORDER TO PROVIDE A CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR RE-DISTRICTING WHEN THE FEDERAL ELECTORAL BILL IS PASSED.

7. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY REACTION TO THE VICTORIAN RESULTS WAS THE REVERSAL IN THE STAND TAKEN BY THE LIBERAL PARTY WITH RELATION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S SEA AND SUBMERGED LAND BILL WHICH ASSERTS COMMONWEALTH AUTHORITY OVER ALL OFFSHORE WATERS AND THE MINERAL DEPOSITS BENEATH THEM. TEN DAYS AGO THE LIBERAL PARTY HAD DETERMINED IN CAUCUS NOT TO OPPOSE THIS BILL IN THE SENATE, WHICH WOULD PRESUMABLY HAVE OPENED THE WAY FOR APPROVAL OF THE BILL WITHIN THE NEAR TIMEFRAME. LIBERAL AND COUNTRY STATE PREMIERS, HOWEVER, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
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WERE EMBOLDENED BY THE VICTORIAN RESULTS TO PUT PRESSURE UPON LIBERAL PARTY FEDERAL POLICY AND UPON LEADER BILLY SNEDDEN ON THIS MATTER. AS A RESULT, THE LIBERAL PARTY ON MAY 21 REVERSED ITS DECISION OF A FEW DAYS BEFORE AND DECIDED TO OPPOSE THIS LEGISLATION IN THE SENATE. AS A STRATAGEM, IT WAS AGREED THAT THE LIBERAL SENATORS WOULD REQUEST A POSTPONEMENT OF CONSIDERATION OF THIS BILL UNTIL THE AUGUST SITTING OF PARLIAMENT. A TECHNICAL READING OF THE GROUNDS FOR DOUBLE DISSOLUTION SUGGESTED THAT THIS ATTEMPT AT DELAYING CONSIDERATION OF LEGISLATION MIGHT ALSO BE USED AS A CAUSE FOR DOUBLE DISSOLUTION OF THE PARLIAMENT. THE CURRENT PORTENT IS THAT THE PRIME MINISTER INTENDS TO PUSH FORWARD AND EITHER FORCE THE OPPOSITION TO ACCEDE TO GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION OR FACE DOUBLE DISSOLUTION.

8. DESPITE MR. SNEDDEN'S PUBLIC STATEMENT THAT THE VICTORIAN RESULTS CAN BE SEEN AS AN INDICATION THAT HE WILL SOON BE PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE RESERVATION WITHIN HIS OWN PARTY ON THE NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF VICTORIA. FORMER LIBERAL MINISTER ANDREW PEACOCK HAS ATTRIBUTED THE RESULTS

PRIMARILY TO VICTORIA LIBERAL LEADER HAMER' S PROGRESSIVE
LIBERALISM. THE FISSURES WITHIN THE LIBERAL PARTY
ARE THERE FOR ALL TO SEE AND WERE RE- EMPHASIZED DURING
THE REVERSAL OF THE LIBERAL PARTY STAND ON THE SEA
AND SUBMERGED LAND BILL REFERRED TO ABOVE. NOT ONLY
DID THE STATE PREMIERS SEEM TO DICTATE FEDERAL
LIBERAL POLICY ON THIS MATTER, BUT TWO FORMER LIBERAL
MINISTERS STRENUOUSLY OBJECTED IN PUBLIC TO THE
REVERSAL OF THE PARTY' S POSITION. JOHN GORTON AND
JIM KILLEN HAVE LONG ADVOCATED FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
CONTROL OF THE SEABED SURROUNDING AUSTRALIA AND HAVE
BY IMPLICATION CRITICIZED THE INTERFERENCE IN FEDERAL
PARLIAMENTARY MATTERS BY THE LIBERAL STATE PREMIERS.
THIS HARDLY BODES WELL FOR THE SUGGESTION THAT THE
LIBERAL PARTY WOULD BE READY TO FIGHT AND WIN A
NATIONAL ELECTION WITHIN SIX MONTH S' TIME. MORE
IMPORTANT PERHAPS IS THE CONTENTION THAT THE LIBERAL
AND COUNTRY PARTIES IN OPPOSITION HAVE SHOWN NONE OF
THE PROGRESSIVE FEATURES OF GOVERNMENT ATTRIBUTED TO
PREMIER HAMER IN VICTORIA. MOREOVER, THERE HAS BEEN
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NO PARALLEL SHOW OF DISUNITY ON LEGISLATION IN THE
ALP, ALTHOUGH THE PRIME MINISTER' S LEADERSHIP SEEMS
TO HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED ON SEVERAL INDIVIDUAL MATTERS
OF POLICY BY OTHER MEMBERS OF HIS CABINET. THE FACT
THAT THE ALP IS PORTRAYED IN THE PRESS AS HAVING
REACHED ITS POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CONCLUSIONS THROUGH
A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS OF DISCUSSION AND VOTING WOULD
SEEM TO ADD AN ADDITIONAL ELEMENT OF FAVOR TO ITS
CONDUCT OF GOVERNMENT OVER THE PAST FIVE MONTHS. THE
LIBERAL PARTY
CAUCUS, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS CONSISTENTLY
DESCRIBED AS HAVING NO VOTES TAKEN AND AS REACHING
ITS PARLIAMENTARY DECISIONS MAINLY ON THE BASIS OF
WHAT WILL GAIN FAVOR WITH THE ELECTORATE.

9. IN SUM, WHILE THERE HAVE BEEN FEW DIRECT EFFECTS
ON FEDERAL POLITICS ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE VICTORIA
ELECTION RESULTS, THERE HAS OBVIOUSLY BEEN AN EFFECT
UPON THE NATIONAL POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE AND POSSIBLY
UPON THE PROSPECTS FOR A DOUBLE DISSOLUTION OF
PARLIAMENT.
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